WHAT'S IN A NAME?
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Psalm 29
Isaiah 43:1–7
Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

"You are precious in my sight, and I love you."
Isaiah 43:4 (NRSV)

"You are my Son, the Beloved;
with you I am well pleased."
Luke 3:22 (NRSV)

In baptism the child's name is called
because our faith is that God thought of
the child before the child was,
that God gave to this child an identity,
an individuality, a name, and a dignity
that no one should dare abuse.
Human existence has its origin
not in the accidents of history and biology,
but in the will and intention of God.

John Leith
An Awareness of Destiny

Dear God, our maker, sustainer, and friend,
in this silence speak your word to us.
Speak a word we can hear together
as your gathered people, your church.
And speak a private word, a personal word,
a word we need to hear.
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Years ago, as we were waiting for our first grandchild, I read everything I could find on the subject. One of my favorites was an article by a Princeton professor who was quite swept off his feet by his new granddaughter. He wrote, "Simply by being born she caused me to be called something no one ever called me before, namely, 'grand.'" He got a new name: Grandfather. It's a favorite topic of mine—what grandparents are called by their

grandchildren. You can, of course, insist that they call you something proper—Grandmother, Grandfather—or you can accept the name they give you. Most little ones can't pronounce grandmother or grandfather. If you're lucky you get something like Nana or Pop Pop, but it can get a lot worse. I clipped and saved a feature article in the *Tribune* once on the subject. The *Tribune* reporter interviewed Nora Burch, who calls herself a "name nerd" and has done extensive research on grandparental names. Ms. Burch thinks that it is the Baby Boomers, now becoming grandparents, who want more modern, more "hip" names than Nana and Pop Pop. Her own mother insisted on "Moogie." Her research uncovered Zsa Zsa, Pitti Pat, Muna, Minnow, Muffer, FaFe, LaLa, Cappie, Gankie, Dappy, Boo-Boo, Bubba, Koko, and Dodo.

Former President George H. W. Bush and Barbara are called Gammy and Gampy, which is almost respectable.

The truth about this topic is that most grandparents don't get to choose their name. The truth is that the first thing that comes out of your first grandchild's mouth is your name. The truth is you may be embarrassed to repeat it in public, but you love it. It is a gift given by one who barely knows you but loves you unconditionally. Your name is precious because of who gave it to you.

I've been thinking about this because my grandparent name changed recently. Perhaps it is because the original giver of the name, when he was about eighteen months old, is now in college. His older sister, who also used the name for years, is about to graduate from college and their younger sister is living in France with a French family for her junior year in high school. I suspect the old name didn't work at all for the French family. In any case, I have a new name, suitable for adult company, and I am very happy about it.

Your name tells you who you are, and sometimes your name reminds you of "whose" you are. Baptism is not the official naming of a child: that's between parents and the state. But we do make a point of asking "What is the Christian name of this child?" and then saying the name and then the promise "You belong to Jesus Christ forever."

To people who had become convinced that they didn't belong to anyone, that God had forgotten them (if indeed there was a God), a people who had seen their beloved city burned to the ground, including God's dwelling place, the temple; to a people who were driven through the burning embers of their homes, across the desert into captivity in a foreign land, a prophet/poet wrote a letter of comfort:

> Now thus says the Lord: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; . . . when you walk through fire you shall not be burned. . . . You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. (Isaiah 43:1–2, 4)

A powerful new motion picture uses the name *Precious* to tell a story of redemption. It is a difficult movie. The director, Lee Daniels, wondered whether America was ready for it. Precious is a sixteen-year-old, African American young woman: obese, illiterate, raped and impregnated by her father, and abused, physically, sexually, and mentally, by her mother. In her fantasy world, she resists her oppression and abuse, imagining herself the star of a video shot as she is molested, seeing in the mirror of her imagination a slender, white, blond girl everyone likes. When she is impregnated a second time and suspended from school, the principal steers her toward a special school, where she meets sensitive teachers and a social worker, begins to learn to read, and amazingly to value herself enough to fight back against her oppression. The *New York Times*' Lynne Hirschberg, who reviewed the movie before it was released to American audiences, said, "Precious is a stand-in for anyone—black, white, male, female—who has ever been devalued or underestimated" (25 October 2009).

When the film was shown last May at the Cannes International Film Festival, a very critical audience gave it an unprecedented fifteen-minute standing ovation.

"I have called you by name; you are precious to me." Those are life-giving words, life-changing words. Everyone should hear those words sometime or another.

Five-and-one-half centuries after Isaiah wrote those words to the Hebrew exiles in Babylon, a descendant of those people, Jesus of Nazareth, thirty years old, was standing on the bank of a river listening to his cousin John preaching. John looked and sounded a lot like those old prophets from the past.

We don't know a thing about the years between Jesus' birth and that day, other than an occasion when he was twelve and his parents took him to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and he became separated from his family, who finally discovered him back in the temple, discussing religion with the theologians and clergy. Then nothing about his adolescence and young adulthood. We assume that his family were observant Jews and regularly attended the synagogue in Nazareth where he sat with his father and the other men to listen to and memorize the Hebrew scriptures and to pray. We assume that his family celebrated the annual holidays: Passover, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah. We assume, because he is never

mentioned again in the Bible, that Joseph died; that Jesus lived with his mother and brothers and sisters. We assume that because he was the eldest son, he inherited his father's trade and business. We assume that he worked as a builder, making tables and chairs, building houses, digging foundations. Some suggest that he walked several miles to the new Roman city of Sepphoris, which was under construction, and found employment there, building houses, temples, maybe the amphitheater, city wall, or aqueduct.

But the fact is we don't know a thing until the day when he is thirty and walks out of town to the river where his cousin John is preaching and urging people to repent, to turn around and live new lives devoted to God, and, as a sign of their decision, to walk into the river and allow John to plunge them into the water in a symbolic act as old as their own ancient religion: to be washed clean, to be submerged, to imitate drowning, and to emerge, to rise, to new life—to be baptized.

We don't know what he was thinking. We can assume, because we know that around the age of thirty many young adults have a kind of vocational and identity crisis, begin to think about who they are, what they're doing, what it means or doesn't mean, whether they love it or hate it, whether they want to continue doing it or try something new. We don't know what Jesus was thinking, but we do know thirty-year-olds who wonder what their life is all about sometimes walk away from whatever they are doing and go back to school, law school, public health school, seminary, go to Africa and work for Opportunity International or the Peace Corps, or consider it all and dig back in, recommit with new passion and insight and hope to what they are doing.

We don't know what he was thinking, but for some reason he decided to walk into the water and let his cousin push him under and pull him back up, washed, baptized. It was at that moment that everything changed for him. None of his later disciples were there that day, so he must have told them, years later when they asked him how it all began, how the sky opened and the Spirit of God, like a dove, descended and he heard a voice addressed to him—no one else heard it—"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Clarence Jordan translates it, "A voice came down from the sky saying: 'You are my dear Son: I'm proud of you'" (*The Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament*).

That is when it all begins for him—the day he changed from doing what he had to do, what he was expected to do, to what he believed God wanted him to do. It was his conversion—the day when he knew, as never before, the pleasure and love of God for him; the day when he knew, perhaps for the first time, that he had a new name, that he was God's beloved.

Parker Palmer is an educator, theologian, writer, and an expert in higher education. His books are invariably insightful and helpful. In *Let Your Life Speak*, he describes struggling with depression and, in the midst of his therapy, remembering the poet Rainer Maria Rilke's famous "love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other." Palmer wrote, "Amazingly, I was offered an unmediated sign of that love when in the middle of one sleepless night during my depression, I heard a voice say, simply and clearly, 'I love you, Parker.' The words did not come from without, but silently, from within. . . . It was a moment of inexplicable grace" (pp. 64–65).

This has social and political as well as personal implications. The urban crisis we face and which continues to deepen is a generation (two generations actually, now becoming three generations) of undervalued people who live lives of desperate poverty and hopelessness, whose only recourse seems to be drugs to anesthetize or to make money in the absence of viable employment opportunities and then the guns and violent crime that inevitably come along too. In his famous *Letter from the Birmingham Jail,* which he wrote more than four decades ago, Martin Luther King Jr. responded to white ministers who asked him to slow down and not press so insistently and stubbornly for equality and justice. "Can't you be patient?" the ministers asked King. He wrote,

> When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers, . . . when you find your tongue twisted as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park and see tears welling up when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, . . . when you are forever fighting a denigrating sense of "nobodiness," then you will understand [why we can't wait].

A denigrating sense of "nobodiness": at the heart of Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership of the civil rights movement was not only a passion for social and political justice based on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but a deeply held theological conviction, a deeply held biblical truth, that human beings—every human being, regardless of color, race, station in life, nationality, income, sexual orientation—every human being is a child of God, everyone called by name, Precious, Beloved.

Sister Joan Chittister, in a recent book, *The Gift of Years*, observes that we live in a society "in which people routinely ask what we do immediately after they ask our name," that our identity is tied to and dependent on what we do for a living. And so unemployment, for whatever cause, is not just a financial crisis but an emotional, identity crisis as well. Who are you when you are not doing what you used to do?

Reflecting on retirement (and unemployment generally) she writes, “I find myself stripped of all the accessories of life. I am face–to–face with my self. And the fear is that there isn’t one. I have spent my life being somebody important, and now there is nothing left but me. I no longer run anything. I’m not becoming anything. I’m just me.”

And it is precisely at that moment, which comes to us all, in one way or another, sooner or later, that we need a life-giving word: “You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

So hear that word this morning, whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey; whatever is happening or not happening in your life—facing surgery, grieving a loss, worried about your job, quietly frustrated and frightened because you can’t find a job, bumping along, wondering if you are doing the right thing, wondering who you really are. Hear a word from God, a true word, a life-giving word:

> Fear not. . . . I have called you by name. You are mine. You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.

Amen.